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ON THE VIOLENT ABSTRACTION OF NATURE

NECROPOLITICS ABSTRACTION, CAPITALOCENE, ECOLOGY, NATURE

It was E.P. Thompson who stated, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, that:

When we encounter some sonorous phrase such as "the strong ebb and flow of the trade cycle" we must be put on our guard. For behind this trade cycle there is a structure of social relations, fostering some sorts of expropriation (rent, interest, and profit) and outlawing others (theft, feudal dues), legitimising some types of conflict (competition, armed warfare) and inhibiting others (trade unionism, bread riots, popular political organisation)—a structure which may appear, in the eyes of the future, to be both barbarous and ephemeral.

We all, therefore, have to be on guard against the use of fetishised concepts, categories, or raw facts, which are often abstracted from their alienated forms of appearance under the social relations of capitalism. Yet, as Bertell Ollman indicates in his book *Alienation*, the average social scientist starts with a conception of factors or relations that are treated as logically independent of one another where each *relatum* is taken as a self-subsistent entity existing apart from the other. The latter philosophy of external relations treats the world as constituted of things external to each other, remaining independent, relatively isolated and static, meriting analysis only when "bumping" into each other. The exogenous interaction of states, akin to the analogy of billiard balls, independently operating within a system of international anarchy would be the example par excellence from neo-Realist international theory. Central to a dialectical method, in contrast, is the philosophy of internal relations in which entities take their meaning in and through their relationality with each other. The full complexity of the inneraction of entities, then, can be assessed only after their prior identity has been accepted as linked within a relational viewpoint. As Ollman highlights, both issues of identity and difference can then be established:

the identity of mode of production and relations of production, private property and the division of labour, production and consumption, base and superstructure, class and state . . . constitutes the ontological basis for the investigation of their actual differences.

Connections are therefore maintained and contained as aspects of each part, as both 'process' and 'relation', forming together

the whole in which they exist. Various philosophical sources for treating internally related aspects as part of the same whole may be established. Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development would be one example. Another example would be Antonio Gramsci's theory of the integral state. Yet it is Karl Marx's conception of capital that establishes factors conventionally thought of as external as, instead, treated as co-elements in a single structure or relational whole within a materialist theory of history. What historical materialism manages to capture is the 'spiral form of development' of concepts, as Engels put in *Dialectics of Nature*, to establish the manifold ways in which entities are internally related as part of a dialectical method of inquiry.

A relational ontology therefore avoids positing entities in external interaction, or succumbing to the pitfall of ontological exteriority, by asserting instead a focus on the internal ties that bind exploitation through value, labour, private property, class, capital, interest, commodities, the state, nature, religion or ideology, to name just a few possible points of departure. This is why Ollman asserts so adroitly a powerful rereading of Vilfredo Pareto's comment that 'Marx's words are like bats. You can see in them both birds and mice'. In short, the relational method of conceiving a world contained in each of its parts is a hallmark of historical materialism. Putting us on guard against the reified domains of trade cycles, states, or market relations and shifting the focus from purely "technological" factors as the typical refuge of economics and capitalist ideology to the internal relations of political economy is therefore the enterprise of historical materialism. The aim of my recently co-authored book with Andreas Bieler entitled, *Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis*, is to have the philosophy of internal relations taken seriously as a contribution to the critique of political economy. The philosophy of internal relations is a revolt against the *violence of abstraction*—as Derek Sayer puts it—through which concepts all too commonly become fetishised, or treated as things, so that such material features come to replace specific social relations. How does this philosophy of internal relations pervade Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life*?

Just as the dialectical method is treated as the *differentia specifica* of Karl Marx's *Capital* so that labour, value, and capital are understood in their inner connection as an integrated totality with Nature, then so too do we find in Moore's world-ecology perspective a dialectical emphasis on the relation between human and extra-human nature. A focus on the web of life therefore reveals the *inner connections* of capitalism through Nature. This is crafted in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* as tracking the *double internality* of capital's internalisation of nature and nature's internalisation of capital. As an example, one could think of the ways in which capitalism extends into the biosphere through the reproduction of cheap labour, food, energy and raw materials in order to turn these 'Four Cheaps' into the commodity system. Alternatively, there are limits to Nature meaning that conditions such as climate change may act as a barrier to the endless accumulation of capital. A dialectical method avoids the distinction of Nature versus Society, or viewing the environment as an object based on its *interaction* with society as externally related. Instead, the philosophy of internal relations guides us through the inner ties of class, capital, Nature to address how frontiers of appropriation are produced and reproduced in the web of life. For sure, Moore accepts that 'it has been easier to assert a dialectical method than to practice to it'. Therefore one can retain a lingering qualm about his constant invocation of human and extra-human natures as interpenetrating and interdependent, rather than inner-related. Yet Moore's book is a hugely significant advancement of debates on the violent abstraction of Nature and the philosophy of internal relations approach, for three reasons:

1. For the critique of the "dirty dualism" of bourgeois thought based on the Nature/Society binary that assumes these concepts as separate, external and universal. One is reminded here of Neil Smith's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* and the critique of the ideology of Nature and the frontier as external: a world that is hostile, that has to be dominated and subjugated in terms of its feminine qualities—Mother Earth—as an object of conquest and penetration. Yet Nature is socially produced, it is a social product, at the hands of capitalist development. As Marx states in *Capital*, Vol. 1:

Animals and plants, which we are accustomed to consider as products of nature, are in their present form, not only products of, say last year's labour, but the result of a gradual transformation, continued through many generations, under man's [sic] superintendence, and by means of his labour . . . In the great majority of cases, instruments of labour show even to the most superficial observer, traces of the labour of past ages.

2. For the assertion of a world-ecology perspective that seeks to establish humanity-in-nature developing through the web of life. A focus here on commodity frontiers or frontiers of appropriation linked to the rise and geographical expansion of capitalism is crucial in extending the law of value over the appropriation of Cheap Nature. Moore, quoting *Grundrisse*, acknowledges that the 'natural fertility of the soil can act like an increase of fixed capital'; and

3. For a focus on *abstract social nature* as the substance of value whereby abstract social nature captures a family of processes through which states and capitalists map, identify, quantify, measure and code human and extra-human natures in the service of capital accumulation. To cite Moore:

If the substance of abstract social nature is the production of "real abstractions"—of time (linear), space (flat), and Nature (external)—its historical expressions are found in the family of processes through which capitalists and state-machineries make human and extra-human natures legible to capital accumulation. The historical conditions of Cheap Nature are found not only in the capital-labour relation but also in the production of knowledge-practices necessary to identify and to appropriate unpaid work.

A focus on the practices constituting abstract social nature that secure and channel the frontiers of capitalism, whose substance is abstract social labour in extending zones of commodification on a wider scale, is therefore a pivotal contribution made by *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

Recognition of the geographically embedded rationalising, simplifying, and mapping practices of abstract social nature, constituting Cheap Nature as part of the commodity frontier movement of capitalism, is therefore crucial in the attempt to overcome the Nature-blindness of contemporary critiques of global capitalism.

Capitalism in the Web of Life is therefore a significant contribution to the analytical foundations of historical materialism through its critique of the violent abstraction of nature and its development of the philosophy of internal relations that is the hallmark of a materialist theory of history.

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